



Why We Attend School: A Qualitative Study at a Proprietary Institution

Jennifer Plumlee

Advisor: Dr. Molly Schaller, Ph.D

Utilizing the personal experiences of for-profit students, the research explored how a student's previous academic history, relationships with faculty and peers, personal responsibilities, and individual attitudes affected a student's ability to be retained.

Research Question

Based on the educational and life experiences of proprietary students, what influences a student's ability to persevere in the academic setting?

Method

- Framed by constructivist paradigm and grounded theory
- Convenience Sampling
- Criterion-based
- Semi-structured interview
- Interview guide: academic history, support, faculty, peers, value

Participants

- Completed at least 50% of program requirements
- 3 males, 6 females
- High School Graduates: 6
- History of withdrawing from higher education: 5
- Age range: 26-68

Findings

Institutional Culture

Positive student-faculty relationships and peer relationships increase institutional commitment while creating a sense of belonging.

Negative student-faculty interactions that abide by policy are easily accepted. When policy or perceived guidelines are violated or the student believes he or she is not valued, student will search for alternative institutions.

Recognition

Tangible, public recognition is more impactful when done at the start of a student's program. Graduate recognition is most effective in the middle of a student's program.

Determination and Motivation

Most participants find motivation in their past experiences, including the need to be self-reliant, fulfill promises, and their children.

Long-term goal setting is essential for success. Students must be willing to sacrifice and delay gratification to achieve long term goals.

Support

Family support is necessary for all students. There is a strong juxtaposition of spousal support for the female participants. Some find emotional, financial, and intellectual support from spouses, while other spouses are non-supportive, judgmental, and jealous.

Recommendations

- Attend to the importance of the faculty-student relationship as well as peer relationships
- Employ a school counselor/psychologist to help meet the emotional and educational needs
- Recognize and celebrate student achievement as an institution
- Create cohorts that foster a sense of belonging and allow for peer interactions
- Recognize academic achievement during the beginning of a student's academic journey
- Use goal setting regularly in the classroom
- Offer opportunities for students to involve their children and families on campus

Discussion

If retention is impacted on multiple levels and by multiple roles, who is responsible?